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BOOK WORLD

ORCHIDS FOR MOTHER. By Aaron Latham.
Little, Brown. 315 pp. \$8.95

By LES WHITTEN

ONE NEED NOT know that this is the fictionalized story of the CIA's most celebrated internecine feud (than which few things are interneciner) to enjoy its polished excitements.

Francis Xavier Kimball, named after the Jesuit saint and code-named "Mother," is in large part modeled after Jesuitical James Angleton, former CIA master counterspy. And Ernest O'Hara, "Mother's" rival and boss, looks suspiciously like earnest ex-CIA director William Colby. It also appears that Aaron Latham picked up much of his yarn and characterization from intensely personal talks with Angleton, that he consulted CIA gray animus Victor Marchetti, that he plumped out his cast with recognizable people (some with real names) like Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, Timesman Seymour Hersh, poet Allen Ginsberg, private eye Dick Bast, Chuck Colson and even Aaron Latham himself, if looks do not deceive, as the CIA ingenu.

Despite all this name dropping *Orchids* (except for a gaudy trashflower ending) is a marvelous spy book. It is the first I have read that successfully takes the emphasis in CIA off "Intelligence" and puts it where it belongs, on "Agency."

This isn't to say that there isn't plenty for the thriller addicts:

"Mother" Kimball schemes to kidnap defector Kim Philby from Moscow during a U.S. space exhibition there. Philby is to be drugged, stashed in an astronaut suit and smuggled out in the Apollo capsule display when it is sent back to the U.S.

"Mother," in the Yom Kippur war, sees an Israeli tank companion cooked in molten metal from a rocket hit, soils himself in fear, recovers manfully and blows off an Egyptian attacker's head.

"Mother's" protégé in the CIA is on a simulated escape mission from the Iron Curtain with his CIA mistress and co-trainee. In some of the book's best writing, they escape instead their combat garb and make love while spotlights probe the forest.

But what really makes the book worthwhile is the sureness with which Latham explores the CIA establishment. There it is, the callousness and mind-blocking about murder, suicide, betrayal, profligacy with taxpayers' money and constitutional protections, pettiness in the ranks, all authentic as a hollow-nosed .22 slug.

How authentic, we now know from, among other things, recently released Freedom of Information Act data. The CIA logs show, as just one example, how agents tracked a newsman and his wife to the National Collection of Fine Arts, checked out the pictures they were looking at, painstakingly determined they spent 42 minutes there compared with the 61 minutes they had stayed at the Renwick, then logged the names of both galleries wrong.

It is this kind of gauche criminality (the CIA is banned domestically from such adventures) that Latham translates into meaningful plot. He mixes the CIA's Keystone Cops with its undeniable sometime genius to make his observations credible.

"Mother," for instance, interrogates a Soviet spy who knows things vital to United States security. How efficiently Latham uses symbol and insight to set the mood for questioning.

"Excuse me," said Mother, placing his fingers on the confessed spy's throat, searching out the pounding jugular. 'I've found,' he went on, 'that I can tell almost as much feeling a man's pulse as a polygraph can tell me with all its needles. So, while we talk, I'll just rest my fingers against your artery.' . . .

"The polygraph frightened people into telling the truth, but, properly used, the fingers on the throat would scare people into candor, too. The pulse-taking trick was not entirely a bluff—just mostly.

"Are you comfortable?" asked Mother.

"Yes," the prisoner lied."

The book moves muscularly but gracefully toward an inevitable, bureaucratic conclusion. By the Gresham's Law of intelligence work, leaden agents drive out gold ones. Dull director O'Hara, conspiring with a similitude of Kissinger, fires eclectic, eccentric "Mother."

Dismissed, the counterspy supreme returns to his backyard hothouse to fuss with his lady-slippers and cattleyas, much as friends say Angleton putters over Ezra Pound papers, hi-fi equipment and hand-tied trout flies.

And in that cruel dismissal, Latham performs a classy literary veronica. We are brought from the illusion of fiction, amid a swirl of cape, to face brute reality. Mother-Angleton is a spy out in the cold. O'Hara-Colby, who forced him out, survives (if briefly).

Why didn't Latham stop there with a fine book flawed only by a few blips too minor to list? With a tragic catharsis? But he can't resist the tempting devil of the genre: the finale of fusillading gunshots, the falling bodies, the horrified spectators.

Yep, he kills off "Mother," manipulates the destruction of Kissinger and O'Hara and thereby grafts a monster sunflower onto his orchidaceous story. Blessedly, though, this bogus ending only takes up the last 21 pages. What comes before, in my view, tells more about the CIA than all the pages produced by the Church and Pike committees combined, leaks and all.